

THE JOY OF MINISTRY

A SERMON

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In St. Luke's gospel chapter 10 verse 20 'Howbeit in this rejoice not that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven'.

This verse comes at the end of a short passage reporting our Lord's words to the seventy disciples on their return from the ministry on which He had sent them. They came back full of joy in the success of their ministry. Jesus had sent them into the towns and villages where He was planning to pass through and had commissioned them to heal the sick and to proclaim the nearness of God's rule. They were ordinary disciples, lay people as it were, these seventy, though they were given exactly the same message as the twelve apostles had been given a short time before. So if we may liken the apostles with their leader Peter to the clergy, then the seventy drawn from the general body of the disciples, would represent the laity. All, whether apostles or ordinary disciples were sent on the same mission and given the same authority and the same message. So this passage is for all of us. May I read these four or five verses. Luke 10:17-20

"And the seventy returned with joy saying, 'Lord even the devils are subject unto us in thy name.' And He said to them 'I beheld Satan falling as lightning from heaven. Behold I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy and nothing shall anyway hurt you. Howbeit in this rejoice not that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'"

The Spiritual Conflict is Real

In this passage first note the reality of the spiritual world of evil and the reality of the conflict with evil. Indeed it is the most

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striking feature of the passage, is this spiritual nature of the conflict in which the Christian ministry and indeed every Christian, lay person or clergyman, is engaged in.

The reality of this spiritual world and spiritual conflict is in sharp conflict with the way we ordinarily look at the world today. Examine yourself, are you co-conscious of the reality of the spiritual conflict with evil which this passage reflects? Jesus, God's Son, took the spiritual world of evil very seriously. He spoke much of Satan the devil, the prince of this world. the enemy as He calls him in this passage. The world of spiritual wickedness is a reality. Jesus met it in conflict at the beginning of His ministry in the temptations. Satan is at work in God's world. The woman afflicted with sickness for eighteen years, Jesus told the synagogue leader, was bound by Satan with that sickness. And in Acts 10 Peter told Cornelius that Jesus in His ministry had gone about doing good and healing from sickness those who were oppressed by the devil. At the end of His ministry Jesus told Peter that Satan had wished to have him to sift him as wheat. It was through Jesus' prayers the devil's machinations and purposes have been thwarted, and Peter himself later described the devil as like a roaring lion going about seeking whom he could devour. The world of evil is a reality. Jesus saw His death on the cross as victory over the spiritual powers of wickedness. Through it He overcame the world, and through it the prince of this world was cast out, as He said in John 12. And the rest of the New Testament testifies to the same truth, that we are engaged in a spiritual conflict with evil in the heavenlies, as St. Paul says in Ephesians 6. The Book of Revelation makes very clear the reality of this conflict which God is engaged in through Christ and through Christians. We must be aware of this, we must keep our eye fixed on our target. Our attention, our ministry, must not be engrossed with



projects, plans and activities of ministry, which only have a slight heavenly dimension but are essentially temporal things belonging to this world.

Today we have very largely lost sight of the fact that it is Satan and the spiritual evil that we are up against. Our interests and our energies are directed and our prayers are absorbed by all sorts of lesser objectives and projects for their own sake. Yet the conflict is a real one. In this passage Jesus calls Satan, the enemy. We must not lose sight of the enemy. Field Marshall Montgomery when he was fighting General Rommel in the Libyan desert had a photograph of Rommel hanging in his field headquarters caravan, because, as he said, he never wanted to forget who the enemy was and what he might be up to. Our world view must never neglect the spiritual world and the spiritual powers of evil which are engaged in fighting God and His purposes and with whom God through Christ and us is in conflict.

The Victory is Certain

Firstly, the passage teaches us that the conflict is real, but secondly that the victory is real. The seventy came back from the mission full of joy because they had seen demonstrated before their eyes the defeat of Satan. They exclaimed 'the devils are subject to us in your name'. The conflict, a real one, is a victorious one. Note that it is in the name of Jesus that we engage in this spiritual warfare for the souls of men and for the institutions of society. 'The devils are subject to us in your name' the seventy exclaimed. In the name of Jesus victory is assured if we engage in our ministry within the context of the character and name of Christ. Victory is assured because we simply follow the victorious Lamb. 'We march in His army' as the Book of Revelation puts it (Chap. 14). He has already cast out the Prince of this world. It was on the cross that Christ won the victory

when He endured the full penalty of sin, the curse that which sin evokes. And He bore this curse triumphantly for at no point at all that experience, all that testing and temptation, did His faith or His love for God waiver. Christ is the victor. Satan did what he could and failed. Christ overcame by bearing the penalty of our sin. Christ is the victor, the cross is the victory and so the cross must be central in our message and ministry. The ministry of the seventy anticipated that victory of the cross, they shared in it proleptically, as it were, before the event. The cross cast its shadow before. Jesus say Satan fall from heaven through the ministry which the seventy exercised in His name. Our ministry is also in His name. It too shares in the victory of the cross. Through it too Satan falls, for Christ shares His triumphant power with us. As we know from His last words in Matthew, all authority in heaven and in earth has been given to Him because He is victor and He shares His authority which His victory on the cross won with His people. He says 'I give you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions and over every power of the enemy and nothing shall in any way harm you'. Here is authority for one hundred percent victory. The enemy is real but we have Christ's authority to tread him under our feet.

The authority that Jesus has given us over every power of the enemy, but it is a spiritual authority over spiritual opposition. We are not promised authority or protection against the physical ills which Satan may inflict. We have seen that sickness is the oppression of the devil, Acts 10, and the epistle to the Hebrews says the devil has the power of death and he exercised this power of death only a few months later against the apostle James, and the martyr Stephen. So plainly the promise 'nothing shall in any way hurt you' with was only spoken a month or two before these men's death, is not in the physical realm. It is not authority over the physical inflictions of sickness or death with which

Satan distresses us, though these too of course are within the wise sovereignty of God's good purposes, but it is authority over every spiritual evil of the enemy which we have been given and we should exercise our ministry with this assurance from Christ for certain victory for Christ has graciously joined us with Him in His victory. Christ has cast out Satan from heaven and He saw the mission of the seventy as part of this. Satan fell from heaven through their ministry. And Christ gives to us the same ministry and the same authority and the same certainty of victory in His name. The conflict is real and we should never forget it. The victory is certain and we should go forward in confidence.

The Weapons are Spiritual

Let us turn to the apostles' example to find the way by which we are to engage in this victorious conflict this spiritual ministry to which Christ sends us. It is by giving ourselves to prayer and to the word of God. The apostles summarised their ministry in Acts 10:4 as 'we will continue steadfastly in prayer and in the ministry of the word'. Prayer is primary. It was through prayer that Jesus defeated Satan's intentions to sift Peter as wheat. 'I have prayed for you' He told His apostle. Again it was through prayer that Jesus cast out the intransigent evil spirit from the epileptic boy for in answer to His disciples enquiry 'why could we not cast it out?', He replied 'this kind comes not forth but by prayer'. raising Lazarus He thanked His heavenly Father that His prayer had been heard. Prayer is primary in our ministry and yet how little we exercise this powerful battering ram against Satan's strongholds. As we go to our ministry, whether in the ordinary daily avocations of life as lay people, or in the more specialised ministries of clergy or bishop, we must follow the example of the apostles who told their fellow disciples that they would give

themselves to prayer. Along with prayer the apostles gave themselves to the ministry of the word. That word is the same word that Jesus entrusted to the seventy, and earlier, to the twelve apostles. It is to proclaim the kingdom of God. Proclaiming the kingdom of God means proclaiming the cross, for Christ's death established the kingdom or rule of God and it was there that Jesus is king, for it is there that Satan was cast out of heaven by the victor. We are to preach Jesus, God's anointed one, Jesus the Christ crucified, He who on the cross became a curse for us, that triumphant in it He might be raised to God's throne. We preach Jesus as king. If we preach this message God will honour it, Satan will fall. Martin Luther had a phrase, 'let the word do it', that is, the word of the cross, the word about the king. Prayer and preaching were the only ministries which the apostles referred to in summarising their activities in Acts. Our ministry is now only in the heavenlies, in the spiritual realm, for the conspicuous triumphing over Satan in the physical through the curing of sickness or raising the dead, is a ministry not entrusted by Christ to His disciples after His resurrection. The epistles, for example, make no reference to any such ministry. We are sent to engage in the much more significant conflict against spiritual wickedness in the souls of men and women and in the institutions of society which they create. And our weapons are spiritual, namely, prayer and the word about Jesus. Jesus has promised that this ministry will be rewarded with success, spiritual success. We will tread down snakes and scorpions, nothing will harm us, and so we must address ourselves unfliningly to this commission with the authority we have received to triumph over every power of the enemy. We are joined with Jesus in His warfare against the evil which holds God's creation in servitude. Our conflict is spiritual and our weapons are supernatural. They are, a word about Christ in His supernatural power, not just an earthly word or a moralising word or a

pedagogic word about some passage of scripture, but a word about Christ, the king, the coming judge, the triumpher over Satan. And our prayer too must be spiritual, supernatural, not just earthly meditation or rote prayer, but persistent prayer to our heavenly Father in the name of Jesus the Lord and king. Men ought always to pray and not to give up, said our Lord. It must be true prayer, prayer that reaches to the throne of God and dwells in His presence.

I now return to my text with which Jesus concluded His words to the rejoicing seventy. They were elated because of the evident signs of authority over evil that was theirs through the name of Jesus. Jesus drew their attention to a much more significant ground for their joy. Their joy was not to rest in success in ministry, even success over so hateful a foe as the enemy of God. Success in one's ministry may not always be obvious and if it is obvious it might even be counterfeit with no heavenly dimension to it. For Jesus predicted in Matthew 7 that there would some who cast out devils in His name who were not even Christians and to whom He would say on the Day of Judgement 'I never knew you, depart from me workers of iniquity, then each of us, bishop, clergy, lay person, should examine our consciences to see how we stand towards Jesus the Lord. Is He our Lord? Are we making His ministry of conflict with Satan through prayer and the word of the cross the one object of our serving Him? We are, as St. Peter says, to make our election sure, by seeking Christ's face, submitting to Him in obedience. For, though the obvious success in ministry is indeed something to thank God for, when it is given to us by God, and we know that it will be given if we are faithful because we have been given a victorious ministry, yet success in ministry is not to be the basis of our joy in ministry. Our true joy is to be found in our relationship with our heavenly Father.

'Rejoice not in this', He told His disciples, 'that the devils are subject to you', as undoubtedly they were and will also be to us in our ministry, 'but', said Jesus, 'rejoice not in this that the devils are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are enrolled in heaven'. That is, rejoice in the unchanging relationship with God our heavenly Father, for He had brought us into His presence through His Spirit. He had adopted us as His Sons and His daughters and we speak to Him as Father. He has written our names in His book, we are His, and He is ours for eternity. That is our real ground for joy and no matter what the outward circumstances of our life or ministry may be, nothing can affect this joy, for nothing can affect this relationship. And Jesus commands us to rejoice in it, and I ask you, I ask myself, to what extent are we obedient to this command of our Lord, 'rejoice that your names are written in heaven'? How often do we think of it? How often do we thank God for this privilege of being eternally His? How often do we rejoice that He is our inheritance and that we are His portion? For the words of our Lord are plain, 'rejoice in this that your names are written in heaven'. Let us ask for grace to obey.

Jesus gives us an example of following His own injunction in the next verses where we read 'at that same hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit and said "I thank you Father because you have revealed these things to babes and sucklings"'. In other words He gave thanks to His Father that the names of His disciples were written in heaven. We should give thanks continually for one another's faith and for the grace of being His for ever. Strengthened with this true joy we will be enabled to go forth to this ministry of conflict with evil giving ourselves to prayer and the word of God, exercising the authority given to us by our Lord over every power of the enemy. Go forth in the assurance that nothing shall in any wise hurt us.

There is joy in ministry in the name of our Lord as the seventy realised, for it is a victorious ministry. There is joy in ministry and we should all taste it. But there is greater, more serene joy, in the relationship with God on which this ministry is based. So as we minister in His name let us be obedient to the command of our Lord and rejoice greetly, rejoice continually that our names with the names of our fellow Christians, the fellow members of our congregation, are written by God in heaven.